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Book Reviews

A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther. By LEWIS BAYLES PATON. (International Critical Commentary Series.) New York: Scribners, 1908. Pp. 339. \$2.25.

At last the English student has a first-class commentary on the Book of Esther. Much has been written in recent years concerning various subjects in the book, even a few commentaries have appeared, but the first full and adequate treatment in English is the recently published commentary by Professor L. B. Paton, of the Hartford Theological Seminary, the latest volume in the International Critical Commentary Series. It contains —excluding the indices—306 pages, 118 of which are devoted to introductory matters, the rest to the detailed comments.

Professor Paton shows himself a master of the extensive literature on the book. It is rather interesting to note what he says concerning the equipment of American libraries: "As a result of my search I have reached the conclusion that, with the exception of MSS, all the books that a student of the Old Testament needs can now be found in American libraries quite as well as in those of Europe."

The detailed comments are sane, cautious, and complete, meeting the needs of the student who desires an adequate knowledge of the narrative of Esther. The author has very wisely included the additions found in the Greek versions in his comments, as the "earliest extant commentary" on the Book of Esther.

The introductory material is discussed under five general heads. Under the first the author indicates the various positions assigned to Esther in Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, and in printed editions of the Old Testament. The text as found in different Hebrew and Greek recensions is treated at length in the succeeding section. This calls for a consideration of the additions to the book, which appear in all the recensions of the Greek text. These additions, the author believes, are due to a desire "to supply the religious element that is so conspicuously absent from the Hebrew edition." The remaining three sections deal with questions of higher criticism, canonicity, and the history of interpretation from the earliest times to the year 1908.

In general, the views adopted by the author concerning disputed questions are those which are suggested in the more recent literature on the various subjects: but Professor Paton has by no means simply restated the conclusions of others; he has investigated the problems for himself, and

has formed his conclusions on the basis of his independent investigation. It is not difficult to follow the discussion, for the successive steps of the arguments are carefully stated. Views with which the author must disagree also receive fair and full treatment.

As is now universally done, Ahasuerus is identified with Xerxes. The author believes the book to have been written "after the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes and the deliverance by Judas Maccabaeus, in 165 B.C.," by a "Persian Jew who had come to live in Judaea and wished to commend the observance of Purim to the people of the land . . . by an account of the way in which this feast originated."

This naturally raises the question, to what extent the Book of Esther is historical, and whether its theory concerning the origin of the feast of Purim is correct. To the discussion of these two problems the author devotes considerable space. In favor of the historical character he points out (1) that the book wishes to be taken as historical; (2) that it was regarded as historical by the Jewish authorities who admitted it into the Canon; (3) that a few of its statements are confirmed by external evidence, though most of them are without such confirmation. Then he calls attention to various difficulties raised by the book, discussing each at considerable length: (1) some of the statements in the book are contradicted by the Greek historians; (2) a number of incidents recorded in Esther, although they cannot be shown to be unhistorical, are so contrary to Persian law and custom as to be improbable; (3) the book contains several inconsistencies with itself; (4) it contains a number of statements which cannot be proved to be untrue, but which are so intrinsically improbable that one has difficulty in believing that they are historical. The results of the investigation are summarized in these words:

In view of these facts the conclusions seem inevitable that the Book of Esther is not historical, and that it is doubtful whether even a historical kernel underlies its narrative. It comes from the same age, and belongs to the same class of literature as the Jewish romances, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, III Ezra, and the story of Ahikar. Its main ideas are derived from the same cycle of legends from which these works have drawn their materials, and in many particulars it bears a close resemblance to them.

What, then, is the real origin of the feast of Purim? Some believe that it is of Jewish origin, some trace it to Greece, some to Persia, while many hold that it was derived, directly or indirectly, from the Babylonians. These several theories, with their many variations, are all carefully tested. Professor Paton believes, with many recent writers, that the feast came from Babylon, and that there is a connection between Mordecai and the

Babylonian deity Marduk, and between Esther and the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, though he admits that much uncertainty remains as to the exact Babylonian counterpart of the Purim feast:

It appears that, while the feast of Purim is probably borrowed either directly from Babylonia, or indirectly by way of Persia, no certainty has yet been reached as to the precise Babylonian feast from which it is derived. The story which accompanies it has many points of similarity to Babylonian mythology, but no close counterpart to it has yet been discovered in Babylonian literature.

A curious phenomenon of the Book of Esther is the omission of the name of God. Various explanations have been suggested, and some have sought to remove the peculiarity by finding anagrams of the divine name in certain passages. The author very properly rejects these fanciful endeavors, and suggests that the right explanation may be found in the occasion for which the book was written:

Esther was meant to be read at the annual merrymaking of Purim, for which the Mishna lays down the rule that people are to drink until they are unable to distinguish between "Blessed be Mordecai!" and "Cursed be Haman!" On such occasions the name of God might be profaned, if it occurred in the reading; and, therefore, it was deemed best to omit it altogether.

Professor Paton does not hold a very high estimate of the moral and religious value of Esther.

The book [says he] is so conspicuously lacking in religion that it should never have been included in the Canon of the Old Testament, but should have been left with Judith and Tobit among the apocryphal writings.

And he expresses full agreement with the words of Luther, "I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much and has too much heathen naughtiness."

The foregoing illustrations may be sufficient to indicate the general attitude of the commentary. The reader may hesitate at times to follow Professor Paton all the way, but no one who desires to understand the Book of Esther can afford to disregard this volume, for undoubtedly it is without equal in the English language, and in many respects it is superior to commentaries in other languages.

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Old Testament Miracles in the Light of the Gospels. By A. ALLEN BROCKINGTON, M.D. Edinburgh: Clark; New York: Scribners, 1907. Pp. 144. \$1.25.

The main thesis of Mr. Brockington's book is that miracles are to be regarded as signs of spiritual truth rather than as proofs of divine power.